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Conflict and Cooperation across the Life Span

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Conflict is pervasive and has been examined extensively in various relationships and communication contexts (Hocker & Wilmot 1991; Putnam and Poole 1987). Communication scholars, however, have only recently begun to investigate this phenomenon from a life-span perspective, suggesting that communication among people at different ages deserves special attention. Nussbaum (1989) argued that people of different ages not only experience life events in unique historical contexts but also develop different physical, cognitive, and psychological selves (→ Developmental Communication). In line with the life-span perspective, recent research on intergenerational communication in conflict situations has demonstrated several key factors influencing individuals' conflict styles, including age, age stereotypes, and culture values. From the life-span perspective, the focus of this article is to explore the nature of conflict, conflict styles, intergenerational conflict management, and how younger and older adults differ in their perceptions and attributions of conflict and conflict management styles.

### **Conceptualizing Intergenerational Conflict and Management Styles**

Putnam and Poole (1987) state that conflict is "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals" (p. 552). In a similar vein, Hocker and Wilmot (1991) define conflict as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (p. 21). Conflict can be functional and dysfunctional, and its constructive functions are contingent upon appropriate management. Therefore, in the last a few decades, scholars have sought to identify, conceptualize, and teach the most preferred and effective conflict styles in various relational and communication contexts (→ Conflict Resolution).

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) identified five major conflict management styles: competing, collaborating (or problem solving), avoiding, compromising, and accommodating (→ Interpersonal Conflict). These five styles have been applied, adapted and validated in slightly different ways in research. Conceptually, the *Competing* style focuses on self-concerns over other's needs by using an assertive communication style in an uncooperative manner to defend a personal position. The *Avoiding* style has been identified with withdrawal and failure to take a position through an unassertive and uncooperative response with low concern for self and the other party. The *Problem-solving* style attempts to generate a plan of action in a cooperative manner that is mutually satisfying to all parties. The *Accommodating* style is a self-sacrificing approach featuring the other person's satisfaction by being unassertive and cooperative. The *Compromising* style emphasizes mutual concession making by following the middle-ground. A few studies have provided justification in combining compromising and problem-solving (e.g., Cai & Fink 2003). The accommodating style specified in Thomas and Kilman (1974) has been largely ignored. However, recently research has found that the accommodating style, which emphasizes relational harmony and not necessarily problem-solving or solution orientation, is a distinctive style. In addition, those four conflict styles: *Competing*, *Avoiding*, *Accommodating* and *Problem-Solving* are found to be applicable to intergenerational communication research (e.g., Zhang, Harwood, Hummert 2005), which has been examined from interpersonal and intergroup perspectives (→ Intergenerational Communication).

Each individual's communication behaviors are influenced by a personal identity, a social identity, and a cultural identity. While personal identity is composed of individuals' unique characteristics (e.g., polite, honest, and hardworking), social identity is developed as a consequence of membership in a particular group within one's culture. In the intergenerational communication context, some group markers might include age, gender, or religion. Without denying the impact of one's personal identity, the life span perspective on intergenerational

communication incorporates intergroup and intercultural theories to enhance our understanding of the particular ways that people from different generations manage their interaction. In line with the interpersonal and life-span perspectives, intergenerational conflict management thus refers to an ongoing communication process whereas younger and older adults negotiate and manage their interaction as individuals while also considering group differences.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Intergenerational Conflict**

Aside from the interpersonal conflict frameworks, several intergroup theories speak to the nature of conflict management in intergenerational relationships. Tajfel's (1981) *Social Identity theory* (SIT) maintains that human beings have an innate need to organize their social world into categories or groups (e.g., age groups) and to show ingroup positive distinctiveness in social comparisons in order to gain self-esteem (→ Social Identity Theory). As a consequence of this categorization, we might ascribe to group traits, behave in stereotypical group ways, show ingroup favoritism and outgroup prejudice and discrimination. Grounded in SIT, Howard Giles's *Communication Accommodation theory* (CAT) examines how different motivational processes influence communication styles, as well as the attributions, evaluations, and intentions for future interaction that people make as a result (→ Communication Accommodation Theory). Guided by CAT, Ellen Ryan's *Communication Predicament of Aging* (CPA) *model* was developed to outline roles of age stereotypes in intergenerational communication (→ Social Stereotyping and Communication). In its simplest form, the CPA model outlines how young people's speech accommodations based on age stereotypes may create a negative feedback cycle for older adults (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood 1986).

Guided by these theoretical frameworks, research on intergenerational communication has revealed unsatisfying young-to-old and old-to-young communication behaviors which are

sources of intergenerational conflict. In intergenerational communication, conflict may arise due to generational differences over lifestyle choices, habits, worldviews, and political beliefs and the negotiation of these differences often involved verbal or behavioral expressions. Conflict can easily escalate if these differences are not managed well. Zhang (2004) examined Chinese college students' written accounts of their intergenerational communication experiences in conflict situations to uncover conflict-initiating factors. Results indicated five major types of initiating factors including old-to-young criticism, old-to-young illegitimate demand and rebuff, young-to-old criticism and disagreement/generation gap. Comparison of the initiating factors identified in this study with previous studies on interpersonal conflict (e.g., Witteman 1992) reveals that some of the categories are shared (e.g., criticism, illegitimate demand, and rebuff) and some are different (i.e., *young-to-old* criticism and disagreement/generation gap, *young-to-old* rebuff and older adults' physical/mental inability). While the most frequent initiating factor in interpersonal conflict is annoyance, the most frequent initiating factor in intergenerational context is criticism. These results indicated the influence and functions of age and age stereotypes in intergenerational communication in conflict situations.

Findings from prior research have indicated the impact of relationship type (family versus nonfamily elders) and the age-specific cultural norm (e.g., filial piety in China) on intergenerational communication in conflict situations. On one hand, mandated by the cultural norm of filial piety, Chinese young people feel obligated to fulfill older adults' needs and desires (Zhang et al. 2005); hence, the young-to-old rebuff factor was not reported in Zhang's (2004) study on intergenerational conflict with Chinese participants, nor was older adults' physical/mental inability. On the other hand, the closer, more frequent contact, and more interdependent relationships with family elders makes it a logical finding that fewer old-to-young rebuffs from family elders than from nonfamily elders were reported by young people in both cultures (Zhang 2004).

Several studies have been conducted as initial forays into intergenerational conflict management styles. Williams and Bergstrom (1995) took an intergroup perspective to examine young people's perceptions of intergenerational conflict. They manipulated age of the target as either an older person or a young adult at a work setting. Results indicated that respondents reported most satisfaction with an older coworker who was cooperative and least satisfaction with a young co-worker who competed. Bergstrom and Nussbaum (1996) examined younger and older adults' general conflict style preferences. Participants completed a conflict questionnaire and recalled and described a recent conflict scenario. They found that younger participants scored higher on the control style whereas the older sample scored higher on the solution-oriented style. They also found that the younger adults preferred to use non-confrontational style as the depth of the conflict increased, but depth of the conflict did not affect older adults' reports of style preference. Bergstrom and Nussbaum (1996) claimed that preference for solution-orientation in conflict management increases as individuals age (→Communication Skills across the Life Span).

Recently, Zhang et al. (2005) examined intergenerational conflict management styles in China from both the older and young adults' perspectives. Older and younger Chinese adults were randomly assigned to evaluate one of the four conversation transcripts in which an older worker criticizes a young co-worker. The young worker's response to the older worker's criticism was manipulated to reflect competing, avoiding, accommodating, or problem-solving. Results demonstrated that older participants favored the accommodating style over the problem-solving style. Young adults either preferred the problem-solving style to the accommodating style, or judged the two styles as equally positive. Their findings revealed the combined effects of age group membership and cultural values on how conflict styles are evaluated.

Intergenerational conflict management is still underdeveloped, and very little research has examined how older and young adults negotiate conflict outside the family context. Intergenerational conflict management from the life-span perspective emphasizes the influence of age group membership, age stereotypes, and culture on the process. In line with the perspective, prior research on intergenerational conflict management has demonstrated that age and age stereotypes play an important role and should not be ignored in studying individuals' conflict management behaviors. A couple of important intergroup issues deserve future attention: Power and age salience (→ Power in Intergroup Settings). Power is an important issue in intergenerational relations given that each age group is relegated with a different age status within a society. Future research on intergenerational conflict should examine the influence of the power dynamic on intergenerational conflict. Age salience is another important factor. As the boundaries between age categories in intergroup situations can be more ambiguous than other social memberships, research on the impact of age salience on intergenerational conflict management styles will enhance our understanding of intergenerational relations.

SEE ALSO: Developmental Communication; Conflict Resolution; Interpersonal Conflict; Intergenerational Communication; Social Identity Theory; Communication Accommodation Theory; Social Stereotyping and Communication; Communication Skills across the Life Span; Power in Intergroup Settings.

KEY WORDS: Conflict; Age; Age Group; Intergenerational Conflict Management Styles; Criticism; Culture and Conflict.

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